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30 June 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: The PFIAB Concern About Strategic Estimates:  
Conversations with Mr. Robert Galvin

1. Mr. Robert W. Galvin (Chairman of the Board of the Motorola Corporation) is a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and the Chairman of its NIE Evaluation Committee, which was established by the PFIAB's former chairman (Admiral Anderson) during the dialogue between the Board and Mr. Colby which took place during the summer and fall of 1975. The Committee is a concrete manifestation of the PFIAB's overall concern about the estimative process and, in particular, strategic estimates. Its other two members are Dr. Edward Teller and Dr. John S. Foster, Jr.

2. As part of its activities, the Committee produced, for the PFIAB, a 1 April 1976 study entitled "A Review of the National Intelligence Estimates on Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Conflict (NIE 11-3/8 series) and of the Intelligence Estimating Process." Mr. Galvin briefed its contents to the DCI, Mr. Stoertz, [REDACTED] and myself on 28 April and sent the DCI and me copies of it on 29 April. To minimize the risk of a paper war, the study was not forwarded to the President and we in the Intelligence Community decided not to make formal written comments on it or its recommendations.

3. On Wednesday, 12 May 1976, I flew to Chicago to talk to Mr. Galvin in the latter's office about the study and its recommendations. Our session, which lasted for over two hours, was cordial throughout, with both of us agreeing that the PFIAB and the concerned members of the Intelligence Community had a common goal -- better national estimates, particularly in the strategic force arena -- and that our chances of attaining that goal would be enhanced by a maximum of informal personal dialogue accompanied by a minimum exchange of formal written memoranda.

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paragraph 25 of the Committee's study) that no group could be convened competent to address the complex issues involved in strategic estimates.

-- While acknowledging that the Community's track record in producing such estimates over the past decade was spotty, I underlined the fact that in no instance have the Soviets ever deployed a new weapons system not flagged by the Intelligence Community well before that system's IOC date, in other words the Community had certainly kept its consumers free from this type of surprise.

5. After discussing the Committee's actual study, I turned to the general question of intelligence estimates, their function and some of the problems inherent in their production, making the following points (with which Mr. Galvin generally concurred):

-- It was not -- repeat not -- the function of intelligence to support (or oppose) any particular set of policy programs, departmental budgets, etc. Those who produce intelligence have a responsibility to be objective, and not to indulge any form of advocacy.

-- In the production of intelligence, particularly estimates, there is one inherent problem: estimates are inevitably produced for multiple audiences, with different interests, backgrounds, perspectives and concerns. It is fairly easy to produce an intelligence product which satisfies none of these audiences, and impossible to produce a single product which will satisfy them all simultaneously. Almost by definition, a level of detail and mode of treatment which one senior consumer finds right for his needs, will be regarded as less than satisfactory by many other consumers -- usually including the staff of the consumer who is himself satisfied.

-- One of the difficulties inherent in producing intelligence is the fact that -- particularly on important questions -- the evidence (no matter how good) is never complete. Consequently, intelligence assessments always embody some measure of judgment and extrapolation from evidence which is fragmentary or ambiguous. As a result, analysis inevitably yields judgments over which honorable

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men can reasonably differ. In the strategic field, there is a related problem of equal importance. Judgments in this area are often driven or shaped by highly technical considerations and highly technical arguments, the relative merits of which are almost impossible for non-technical laymen to assess.

-- These aspects of the intelligence process heighten the importance of the interaction between technically versed analysts and policy-level users or consumers of intelligence. It is essential that these consumers not be or become the captives of any particular school of technicians and equally essential that the final judgments developed by technically versed analysts be critiqued by other analysts with equal technical expertise, with the consumer being put on clear notice whenever there is a significant difference of equally expert technical opinion.

6. Some of the above factors and considerations, at least to me, raised problems with what I perceived as part of the philosophical approach underlying some of the PFIAB's recommendations. I had great difficulty with the thesis that intelligence (on strategic questions) should simply lay out all the alternative courses of action which the Soviets could pursue (i.e., all hypotheses not positively refuted by available evidence) and then make no effort to assess the relative probabilities of the Soviets pursuing some of these courses of action in lieu of others. This approach, to my mind, left the ultimate users of intelligence -- especially the President and his most senior advisors -- at the mercy of technical shamans. I felt it essential not to suppress divergence of opinion but equally essential to force the technicians to compete with each other and to give the ultimate consumers some feel for the way those versed in the technical details of intelligence problems assessed the relative probabilities of alternative judgments.

7. With respect to the Board's concrete recommendations, I made the following points:

-- The Board's principal recommendation -- the creation of a competitive analysis group -- is handled and discussed separately. In sum, Mr. Galvin and I worked out a procedure for developing an arrangement that would be mutually satisfactory but

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which would not involve anyone outside the Board and the DCI, i.e., we agreed that there would be no necessity for NSDMs signed by the President directing the DCI to do what the DCI was already doing.

-- On the other recommendations contained in paragraph 40 of the Board's study, I made the following observations:

"a. The subject of Soviet intentions, objectives and tactics in the broadest sense is deserving of more comprehensive treatment than it now receives in NIE 11-3/8. Perhaps a separate NIE on this central topic should be commissioned."

COMMENT: I agreed and noted that such a separate NIE was already in train.

"b. Consideration should be given to establishing a small (no more than six), part-time group of 'elder statesmen' who, under the DCI's aegis, would review and comment on selected NIEs or on other crucial intelligence products -- prior to publication and after being given full access to all of the evidence used by the analysts in formulating their appraisals."

COMMENT: Picking up from my earlier conversations with Mr. Galvin on this topic, I explained again the concept of the Intelligence Advisory Panel to the DCI, which Mr. Galvin said would more than meet the Board's concerns in this area.

"c. A thorough study should be made to determine whether the intelligence Community has an affirmative obligation to declassify and provide information to the public. As a related matter, whether the intelligence community should be required, upon the publication of each annual strategic force estimate, to specify in the document which of the key judgments it is willing to be held publicly accountable for five years hence, should also be considered."

COMMENT: I agreed with the first sentence of this recommendation but took strong exception to the second, noting that I had little sympathy for the concept of

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publicly pillorying officers for the exercise of discretionary judgment some years after the judgment had been exercised, particularly since in many cases intelligence judgments could stimulate policy actions which in turn would make those judgments "incorrect." Where this occurred, however, intelligence officers were not wrong but were doing their job in the best way possible.

"d. The question of the time period to be covered by the NIE 11-3/8 series should be reconsidered in light of the consumer's desire for timely information and in view of the limitations of the intelligence community with regard to accurate, long-term predictions."

COMMENT: I agreed that the time frame covered by strategic estimates should be continually reviewed with the principal consumers and users of its estimates but noted that, in the final analysis, the needs and preferences of these consumers would have to be controlling.

"e. The Board should consider encouraging policy-makers and decisionmakers to schedule oral intelligence briefings on topics of interest as principal means of receiving intelligence. The purpose would be to develop a direct relationship with the knowledgeable intelligence officer, and cultivate a better understanding between the user and the producer."

COMMENT: I agreed that we needed to give continuous attention to more innovative and flexible ways of presenting intelligence and that certainly a lot more could be done with oral briefings.

"f. The intelligence community should reassess the function of the NIE, the variety of readership that must be served, and the kinds of topics that are most important to each. For example, in lieu of a single NIE on Soviet offensive and defensive forces for intercontinental conflict, it may be preferable to place greater analytic emphasis on addressing narrower topics in varying degrees of detail, depending upon the principal audience of interest."

COMMENT: I agreed with the first sentence, but reserved on the second -- noting that a series of

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excessively narrow and detailed estimates would meet consumer resistance since consumers were always pressing for comprehensive studies which synthesized the Community's views on broad areas of consumer interest.

"g. Awareness of the efforts of this Committee served as a stimulus for a number of activities by the intelligence community with regard to observations in the Board's letter of 8 August 1975. The full Board should consider establishing an 'NIE Evaluation Committee' as a permanent body of the PFIAB and, to aid in the maintenance of 'fresh ideas,' the membership should be rotated periodically."

COMMENT: I strongly endorsed the approach reflected in this recommendation, noting that continual interaction and consultation between the Board and the Intelligence Community would be beneficial to both and would help both achieve their common goals.

-- As indicated above, I persuaded at least Mr. Galvin that no NSDM was necessary and hence did not specifically address the text of the draft NSDM appended to his Committee's study. I did note, however, that that draft NSDM talked about two things which were quite distinct: competitive analysis in producing an intelligence estimate and a fresh approach to net assessments. The former was an Intelligence Community problem which we were in fact addressing. The latter was an important issue, but not one which the Intelligence Community could or properly should address.

  
George A. Carver, Jr.

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cc: Mr. Howard Stoertz  
NIO for Strategic Programs

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4. I opened the 12 May session with some general comments on the NIE Evaluation Committee's study, paying particular attention to the "Users' Survey" the Committee had conducted, the results of which were summarized in the study's paragraphs 16-29. I agreed with Mr. Galvin that the fact that people whom the Committee had consulted had certain opinions was in itself a matter of intrinsic significance, quite apart from whether or not one felt that those opinions were warranted or had any solid basis in evidence. I did note, however, that the summary of the survey presented in the Committee's study was a little hard to read since the time period to which various criticisms were keyed was not clear -- i.e., were they criticisms of all strategic estimates, or were some of these criticisms directed specifically at estimates of a certain period, such as the late 50s, mid-60s, etc. -- and it was hard to evaluate some of the criticisms without knowing who was making them, since various interested parties had special concerns or perspectives which would inevitably shape their reactions to the estimates in question. While stressing that I did not want to engage in a sterile debate, I did orally take exception to some of the more outrageous assertions in the Committee's study. For example:

-- I flatly denied that estimates were ever prepared by the Intelligence Community "to keep the lid on defense spending by minimizing the threat" or "to help rationalize an administration's foreign and domestic policy."

-- I agreed that various people making inputs to estimates might have their views shaped by departmental constraints or considerations, but also flatly denied that, so far as the DCI or the Intelligence Community as a whole was concerned, there were any judgments or topics which were "off limits." The analysts who produced these estimates were fallible mortals, but they did their best to call the shots as they thought evidence dictated and any attempt to constrain their judgments would have produced open revolt.

-- I agreed that, perhaps inevitably, a disproportionate share of the total intelligence workload fell on the shoulders of a relatively small group of able analysts, but rejected as self-defeating a notion (reflected in

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